Reconsidering Division Cavalry Squadrons

Part I: A Problem with a Proven Solution

by MAJ Nathan Jennings

*(**Editor's note:** This is the first in a four-part series that describes the problem, history and potential solutions for the U.S. Army's lack of dedicated division-level ground reconnaissance-and-security capacity.)*

The U.S. Army embraced brigade-centric modularity in 2004 and began to divest its ability to conduct forceful reconnaissance and security at division and corps levels.[1] In a marked change from the cavalry structure it had predominantly employed since World War II, the institution decisively concentrated its capacity – in the form of mechanized, motorized and aerial scouts – to fight for information and provide freedom of maneuver at lower tactical echelons. This reorganization eliminated the division-cavalry squadrons (DivCav) and armored-cavalry regiments (ACRs) that had served as the "eyes and ears" of two- and three-star tactical commanders for more than 60 years in favor of a larger quantity and diversity of squadrons assigned directly to brigade combat teams (BCTs).[2]

Despite the benefits of modularity, the resulting transformation created capability gaps in the Army's ability to answer information requirements during joint operations. As argued by LTG H.R. McMaster, who commanded 3rd ACR in Iraq in 2005, "Trends in armed conflict that include all domains contested; increased lethality and range of weapons; complex and urban terrain; and degraded operations all argue for increasing importance of reconnaissance-and-security capabilities at all echelons."[3] This problem, which coincided with shifts in institutional focus to large-scale counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns in Southwest Asia, has become acute as adversary states design challenging area-denial networks to dissuade forced-entry operations.

Army divisions in particular have lost the ability to aggressively shape their maneuver with dedicated reconnaissance-and-security formations. When planning and executing diverse ranges of offensive, defensive or stability actions in expeditionary theaters, two-star commanders must now rely on, and thus commit, assigned brigades to conduct necessary zone, route and area reconnaissance tasks, and screen, guard and cover (with significant augmentation) missions that DivCav previously performed.[4] As LTG Stephen Twitty, who commanded 1st Armored Division, reported to Army Chief of Staff GEN Mark Milley after a warfighting assessment exercise in 2015, this "reliance on BCTs" has challenged the division's ability to "shape the deep fight."[5]

Given the unlikelihood of recreating permanent DivCav due to resource constraints and preferences for standardized modularity, the institution can explore more creative options for providing higher-echelon reconnaissance-and-security capacity through doctrinal solutions. As an expedient option, it should consider establishing a series of customized organizational templates for the purpose of temporarily detaching, training and enhancing BCT cavalry squadrons to specifically answer division or joint-task-force commanders' information requirements. The resulting cavalry task force, when empowered as a direct reporting element with cross-domain capabilities, offers the potential to provide internally resourced, tactically effective and readily available scouting capability at the two-star level.[6]

Similar to the Army's emerging excursion concept – where a corps temporarily assigns entire BCTs to conduct reconnaissance and security – tailored cavalry task forces, assembled from assets typically controlled by a division, would provide, as Twitty recommends, the "re-establishment of division-level reconnaissance capability" with the "means to achieve an air-ground layered reconnaissance and information plan necessary in today's complex operating environment."[7] Designing these templates could range from enhancing a single squadron with graduated capabilities to reorganization of entire brigades. Incorporating both historical insight and contemporary operational assessment. The cross-domain construction would balance lethality, operational reach, covertness, versatility and integration of emerging technologies to create agile and versatile scouting formations.

DivCav background

The long evolution of U.S. Army's DivCav squadrons mirrored the conceptual tensions that shaped all American cavalry practices since initial mechanization. The first debate, which eventually led to their demise, centered on

questions about where to concentrate mounted scouting formations in the echeloned order of battle. In a marked contrast with its current brigade-centric structure, the Army predominantly favored assignment of reconnaissance-and-security elements at division and corps levels from 1940 to 2004. While corps controlled cavalry groups – and later regiments – to enable their maneuver, divisions owned a variety of direct-reporting and dedicated "recce" squadrons according to mechanized, motorized, light, airmobile and airborne profiles to accomplish the same.[8]

The second discussion that defined the evolution of division-level cavalry stemmed from changing opinions on how and why to arm and employ them. This unending debate resulted in 70 years of vacillation over optimal inclusion of wheeled and mechanized scouts, heavy armor, attack and scout aviation, indirect fires and light infantry according to desired stealthy or forceful capabilities.[9] As early as 1942, MG Charles Scott, who observed the British Eighth Army in North Africa on behalf of the U.S. Army, noted that "reconnaissance must be organized to fight in execution of its mission, to fight for time to send information in, and to fight for time for the main body to properly utilize the information."[10] Army leaders would frequently ignore this prescription in favor of fiscal savings and greater strategic mobility during subsequent decades.

World War II exploded as the Army's formative experience in conducting both wheeled and tracked reconnaissance operations. By 1945 it deployed 13 mechanized squadrons and two armored reconnaissance battalions to support heavy divisions, and 42 wheeled reconnaissance troops to support infantry divisions across Europe. Simultaneously, the institution created 13 mechanized-cavalry groups with two squadrons each to enable corps operations. While squadrons and groups possessed a mix of Willy's jeeps, M8 Greyhound armored cars, M2 half-tracks and M5 Stuart and M24 Chaffee light tanks, infantry division scouts mostly relied on dismounted Soldiers, cars and jeeps. The Pacific theater saw more limited cavalry employment while featuring residual horse-mounted actions like 126th Cavalry Regiment's storied charge on the Bataan Peninsula in January 1942.[11]

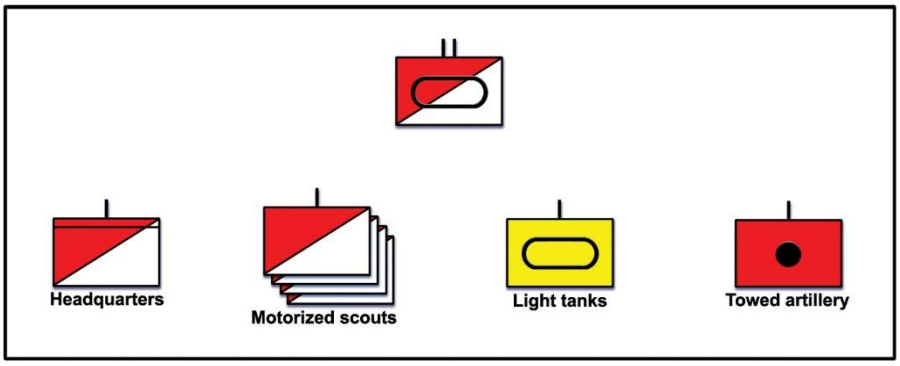

Figure 1. Mechanized reconnaissance squadron, World War II.

The performance of America's mechanized cavalry against German, and to a lesser extent, Japanese combined-arms forces cemented its status as a distinctive sub-branch in its rapidly modernizing army while leaving questions about optimal employment. Studies 48 and 49 of the post-war European Theater of Operations (ETO) Board, which assessed organizations and tactics respectively, found that while division squadrons spent 13 percent of their time on reconnaissance missions and 24 percent on security missions, they allocated 63 percent of their efforts to other combat tasks requiring greater lethality.[12] One squadron commander lamented that they had to "fight to obtain information in practically every case."[13] This reality contrasted sharply with wartime doctrine that predicted stealthy operations for mounted scouts.

The Army retained its tiered cavalry structure after World War II despite massive demobilization in 1948 and 1949. Based on the ETO Board's findings, it strengthened the few remaining squadrons and troops in the armored and infantry divisions – temporarily renamed battalions and companies – with wheeled scouts, light tanks and mechanized-infantry teams integrated at the platoon level. This reorganization emerged under the Pentomic transformation, which catalyzed a force-wide restructuring to allow dispersed survival on nuclear battlefields while allowing greater dismounted capacity for security operations and requiring less *ad hoc* augmentation during offensive maneuvers. The inclusion of tanks, though minimal, reflected intent to conduct

aggressive reconnaissance, lethal counter-reconnaissance and survivable guard missions against more numerous Soviet forces.[14]

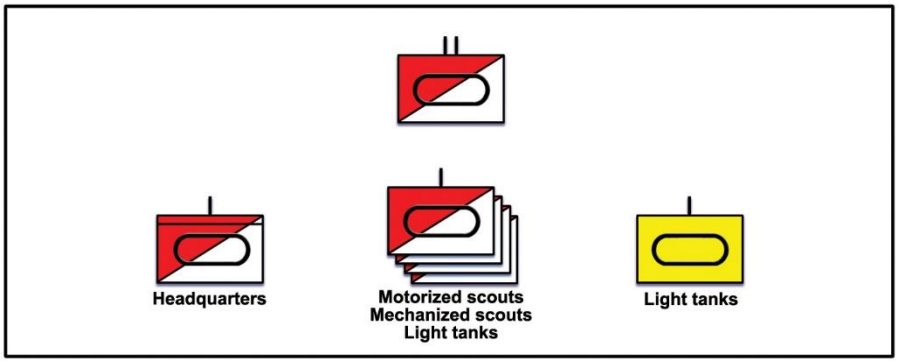

Figure 2. Reconnaissance battalion, armored division, Pentomic.

DivCav development did not occur in isolation of other echelons after the global war. While the Army initially reorganized its cavalry groups as constabularies in West Germany, it soon created the 2nd, 6th and 14th ACRs (Light) to enable corps operations when tensions heightened with the Warsaw Pact. As described by historian and veteran U.S. Army officer Stephen Bourque, these "combined-arms organizations" were structured to "operate along wider frontages and at greater depths … reacting expeditiously to opportunities or crises, all in extended battlespace." The initial three ACRs, and the 3rd and 11th regiments that followed, would gain in armament throughout the Cold War and achieve outsized success in Vietnam and the First Gulf War.[15]

The Korean War from 1950 to 1953 severely tested U.S. Army expeditionary reconnaissance limitations. With infantry-centric divisions providing most of the combat forces due to the restrictive terrain and a dearth of available heavy units in the theater, their light wheeled-cavalry companies, rather than mechanized reconnaissance battalions, would learn hard lessons against a larger combined-arms foe. Though scouts in 7th Infantry and 1st Cavalry Divisions in particular provided critical security under trying conditions with aging World War II-era platforms, they suffered from poor training, inadequate firepower, overtasking and high attrition. However, their overall performance in difficult terrain prompted institutional interest in providing infantry divisions a full reconnaissance battalion.[16]

Combined-arms integration

From 1962 to 1964 the Army revamped its divisions, and their associated cavalry formations, under a transformation program called Reorganization Objective Army Division (ROAD) to allow greater tactical and strategic flexibility. The modifications added Patton-series medium tanks and M1114 Armored Reconnaissance Vehicles, new information-collection technologies and, most importantly, a large rotary-wing troop to expand observation frontage. The new airmobile divisions received air-centric squadrons to support longer and faster movements, while airborne divisions received light wheeled squadrons. A long-lasting administrative aspect of ROAD included realigning the dispersed cavalry units under historical regimental lineages.[17]

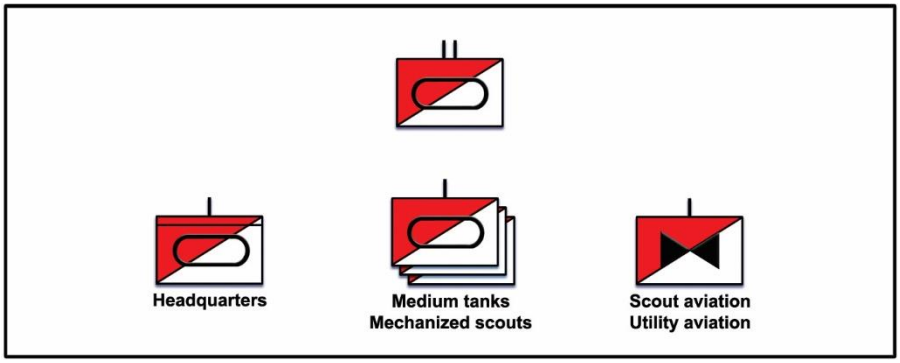

Figure 3. H-series DivCav squadron, ROAD.

The H-series squadrons of the 1960s thus provided Army divisions with scouting formations that possessed a greater balance of mobility, protection and firepower. As described by Field Manual (FM) 17-35, ***Armored Cavalry Units, Armored and Infantry Divisions***, in 1957, the changes armed two-star commanders with a "closely integrated team of combined arms capable of conducting virtually any type of combat action."[18] While heavier armor allowed more aggressive reconnaissance, the air-cavalry troop greatly expanded operational reach. Yet despite the advantages of organic close air support, higher commands frequently detached the rotary wing for separate purposes, thereby limiting squadron effectiveness.

The new ROAD squadrons' combat test came not on the plains of Europe against the Warsaw Pact forces they were designed to counter but in the jungles of Vietnam against a more irregular opponent – the Viet Cong. Though Army Chief of Staff GEN Harold K. Johnson initially professed the "limited usefulness" of cavalry armed with M48 Patton tanks and new M113 Armored Personnel Carriers in Indochina, the Army eventually deployed six cavalry squadrons and one cavalry regiment – in addition to 10 mechanized infantry and three armor battalions – as the conflict intensified.[19] LTG Donn A. Starry, who assessed the effectiveness of U.S. mounted forces against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army, said armored cavalry "emerged as powerful, flexible and essential battle forces" in both "close combat" and "pacification and security operations."[20]

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Army again reorganized its combat divisions under the Division 86 and then Army of Excellence (AoE), initiatives designed to leverage fiscal, manpower and logistical efficiencies across the force. While the changes mostly impacted infantry divisions, the heavy-division squadrons, after some uncertainty, lost their tanks and reorganized their helicopters into two smaller air troops. They also moved from reporting directly to the division commander to inclusion within divisional aviation brigades. Despite their adoption of heavily armed and armored Bradley-variant M3 Cavalry Fighting Vehicles (CFVs) beginning in 1981, J-series squadrons were now equipped for only moderately contested information collection against peer adversaries.[21]

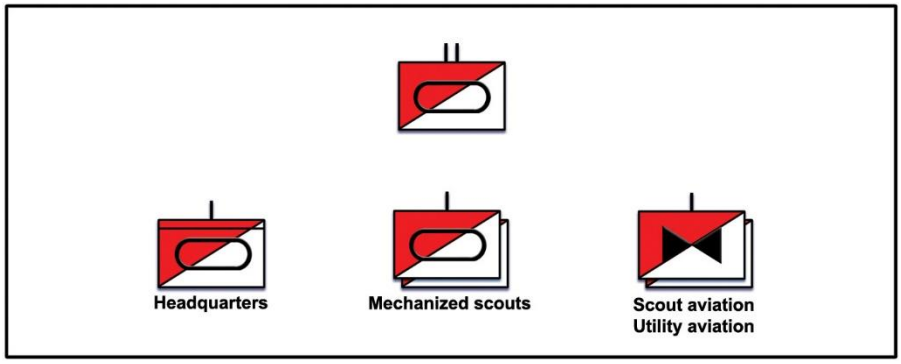

Figure 4. J-series DivCav squadron, AoE.

Proponents of the J-series argued that the squadrons' likely position behind larger cavalry regiments in the Army's doctrinal order of battle would compensate for less firepower while disincentivizing employment of scouts as assault troops. Though officers like Starry cautioned against misusing squadrons as maneuver battalions because they were "the central core of the reconnaissance team," other cavalry champions like MG Robert Wagner countered that they needed "tanks for hard combat capability" and that "reconnaissance requires armor." MG Thomas Tait, then commandant of the Armor Center, agreed in ***ARMOR*** in 1987 when he aimed "to provide the squadron commander with a third ground cavalry troop" and "put the tanks back in the division cavalry."[22]

Even as American heavy cavalry lightened its profile, mounted scouts in the infantry divisions underwent similar alterations. In keeping with AoE prioritization of strategic mobility, the light squadrons adopted an air-centric profile with two air troops and a single ground troop equipped with unarmored humvees. Airborne divisions requiring deeper and faster reconnaissance received another aviation troop. The 82nd Airborne Infantry Division, as an anomaly, intermittently included air-droppable M551 Sheridan Armored Reconnaissance Airborne Assault Vehicles and wheeled Light Armored Vehicle-25s (LAV) throughout the 1980s and 1990s to allow modest anti-armor capability.[23]

The First Gulf War in 1991 provided the proving ground for AoE forces. Since the United States deployed several corps with armored, mechanized, light and airborne divisions to defeat the entrenched Iraqi army, the conflict featured a variety of DivCavs with varying compositions of ground and air troops. Several division commanders, anticipating an armored fight, augmented their heavy squadrons with M1A1 Abrams main battle tanks and additional AH1 Cobra and AH64 Apache attack helicopters to support M3 CFV ground scouts as "hunter-killer" teams. Throughout the short conflict, these cavalries executed doctrinal zone reconnaissance and mobile screens as they led their parent commands through the 2nd and 3rd ACRs' forward lines to engage the Iraqi Republican Guard.[24]

The success of squadrons with augmented armor in Operation Desert Storm once again shifted the reconnaissance debate in favor of maximal fighting capability. MAJ Joseph Barto, who served as executive officer of 2-4 Cav in 24th Infantry Division (Mechanized) during the campaign, later attested that their "organic tank and cavalry fighting vehicle mix" perfectly fulfilled "the division commander's requirements – all the time and under all conditions."[25] LTG Frederick Franks, commander of VII Corps, likewise believed he "needed armored – read tanks – reconnaissance in the [DivCav] squadron."[26] Soon after, the Army restructured DivCav as L-series types that closely mirrored ACR squadrons with greater inclusion of heavy tanks and attack aviation.[27]

21st-Century evolutions

The American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 featured the final combat action by U.S. Army division-level cavalry. The 3rd Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, led 3rd Infantry Division (Mechanized) in a high-tempo reconnaissance-in-force from Kuwait to Bagdad that validated the L-series pairing of M1 Abrams tanks and M3 CFVs. The air-centric squadrons of 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions simultaneously provided security for infantry forces. However, as noted by historian John McGrath in his 2008 work, ***Scouts Out***, 3-7 Cavalry's relative overmatch as a combined-arms team "sometimes made it more valuable as an additional maneuver force than as a reconnaissance element."[28] As before, disagreements over optimal cavalry employment would catalyze yet another transition.

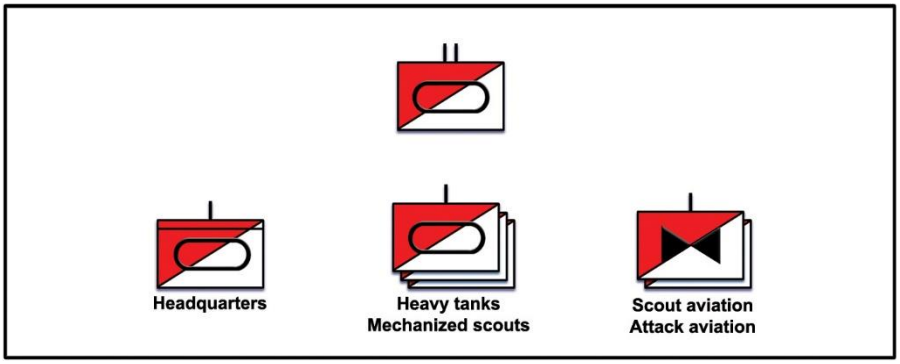

Figure 5. L-series DivCav squadron, 1995-2004.

Beginning in 2004, the Army adopted a modular design that transferred many tactical capabilities from corps and divisions to BCTs. This transformation included, despite 3-7 Cavalry's recent performance, the elimination of all DivCav to allow expanded combined-arms capability in each brigade. The new BCT squadrons organized without organic tanks or aviation while including a dismounted infantry company in the light squadrons. The resulting predominant reliance on lightly protected M1114 humvee trucks and moderately protected M1127 Stryker Reconnaissance Vehicles – with only limited M3 CFV density in armored BCTs – once again optimized the cavalry force for stealthier observation. The reorganization of the final ACR in favor of three lightly armed and short-lived battlefield surveillance brigades in 2011 completed the demise of Army scouting organizations that had traditionally teamed scouts with tanks and aviation.[29]

As during previous transitions, the lightened cavalry force – which aimed to offset diminished organic lethality with new surveillance and target acquisitions technologies – came under withering criticism over the next decade as the Army prioritized COIN campaigns in the Middle East.[30] Then, in 2015 and 2016, as the institution refocused on nation-state competition in East Europe, East Asia and Mesopotamia, it increased the cavalry's tactical flexibility in the armored BCTs by replacing humvees with more M3 CFVs and adding a tank company to each

squadron. The Stryker scouts likewise assumed ownership of the Mobile Gun System and anti-armor companies in their brigades. COL Matthew Van Wagenen, who commanded 3rd Armored BCT, 1st Cavalry Division, predicted that the "enhanced reconnaissance structure" would likely "offset some of the losses in force structure."[31]

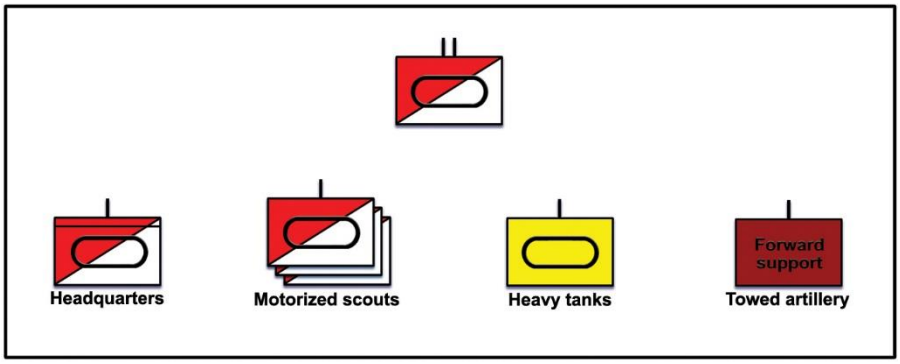

Figure 6. Cavalry squadron, armored BCT. ***(FM 3-20.97, Cavalry Squadron, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2016)***

These latest reorganizations illustrate the transitions that have defined the ever-changing form, identity and purpose of American cavalry since mechanization. Since World War II, the Army's mechanized, wheeled and aerial scouts have vacillated between optimization for stealthy and forceful reconnaissance while often receiving *ad hoc* capabilities to negotiate emergent wartime challenges. After aligning its mounted reconnaissance assets at divisions and corps levels for more than 60 years, the institution has decisively concentrated them at lower tactical echelons in the 21st Century. This evolution has led to an inadequacy where divisions commit subordinate brigades to fulfill their doctrinal imperative to "conduct reconnaissance-and-security operations in close contact with the enemy and civilian populations."[32]

Part II of this series will employ the case study of 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry Regiment, in Vietnam to examine this enduring mandate in the most challenging of tactical landscapes.

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Notes

[1] This study identifies specific echelons rather than generalizing an operational level of war; see Lawrence Freedman, ***Strategy: A History*** (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) for a description of the concept.

[2] BG Lee Quintas, "Commandant's Hatch: Cavalry Update," ***ARMOR***, July-September 2014; retired GEN David Barno and Dr. Nora Bensahel, "The Future of the Army: Today, Tomorrow and the Day after Tomorrow," Atlantic Council, Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, September 2015.

[3] LTG H.R. McMaster, correspondence with author, Nov. 5, 2016.

[4] FM 3-98, ***Reconnaissance and Security Operations***, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, July 1, 2015.

[5] LTG Stephen Twitty to GEN Mark Milley, memorandum, Nov. 12, 2015, 1st Armored Division, "1st Armored Division [Network Integration Evaluations/Army Warfighting Assessment] Force Structure and Tactical Capabilities Observations."

[6] "Joint Cross-Domain Fires and Maneuver," whitepaper, Army Capabilities Integration Center, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, June 1, 2016, defines cross-domain fires and maneuver as "operations to exploit an opportunity from one or more domains."
[7] LTG Stephen Twitty to GEN Mark Milley, memorandum, Nov. 13, 2015.
[8] John J. McGrath, ***Scouts Out: The Development of Reconnaissance Units in Modern Armies***, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008; Mary Lee Stubbs and Stanley Russel Connor, Center for Military History Publication 60-1, ***Armor-Cavalry, Part I: Regular Army and Army Reserve,*** Army Lineage Series, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1969.
[9] Dr. Robert S. Cameron, ***To Fight or Not to Fight***, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013.
[10] MG Charles Scott, "Armored Reconnaissance," ***Cavalry Journal***, November-December 1942.
[11] McGrath.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Quoted in Cameron.
[14] McGrath.
[15] Stubbs and Connor; Stephen Bourque, "The Hundred-Hour Thunderbolt: Armor in the Gulf War," in ***Camp Colt to Desert Storm: The History of U.S. Armored Forces***, ed. George Hofmann and Donn Starry, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999.
[16] Cameron.
[17] Stubbs and Connor.
[18] FM 17-35, ***Armored Cavalry Units, Armored and Infantry Divisions***, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1957.
[19] Quoted in LTG Donn A. Starry, ***Mounted Combat in Vietnam***, Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1977.
[20] Ibid.
[21] MAJ Peter S. Kindsvatter, "The [AoE] Divisional Cavalry Squadron," Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies monograph, 1985, http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a167712.pdf.
[22] Starry; MG Robert E. Wagner, "Division Cavalry: The Broken Saber," ***ARMOR***, September-October 1989; MG Thomas Tait, "Commander's Hatch: Reconnaissance: Remembering Some Lessons Learned," ***ARMOR***, July-August 1987.
[23] McGrath.
[24] Bourque.
[25] MAJ Joseph C. Barto, ***Task Force 2-4 Cav – First In, Last Out – The History of the 2nd Squadron, 4th Cavalry***, San Francisco: Tannenberg Publishing, 2015.
[26] LTG Frederick Franks, interview with Kindsvatter, VII Corps tactical-action center, Iraq, April 2, 1991, Army Lessons-Learned Information System.
[27] FM 17-95, ***Cavalry Operations***, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, December 1996.
[28] McGrath.
[29] Barno and Bensahel.
[30] For examples of criticism, see MAJ Charles G. Bies, "Too Light to Fight: the Infantry [BCT] Cavalry Troop In Combined-Arms Maneuver," ***ARMOR***, July-September 2014; CPT Kyle Trottier, "The Cavalry Squadron of 2025," ***ARMOR***, January-March 2015; MAJ Todd L. Poindexter, "Transforming Mechanized Reconnaissance: How The Armored Brigade Combat Team Cavalry Squadron Should Be Structured For Reconnaissance And Security Operations In The Near Future," Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies monograph, 2014, http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a611749.pdf.
[31] Leah Kilpatrick, "Cavalry [BCT] assumes new design, transition nearly complete," Army News Service, Feb. 17, 2016.
[32] FM 3-98; whitepaper, "Cavalry Squadron Capabilities Review."

Acronym Quick-Scan

ACR – armored cavalry regiment
AoE – Army of Excellence
BCT – brigade combat team
CFV – Cavalry Fighting Vehicle
COIN – counterinsurgency
DivCav – division cavalry
ETO – European Theater of Operations
FM – field manual
ROAD – Reorganization Objective Army Division